


# Farewell, SMA Hall

Story and Photos by SGM Phil Prater



ONE of SMA Robert E. Hall's many appealing qualities is that he still considers himself to be a regular soldier. He gets up at 5:30 a.m., trips the coffeemaker switch and within a few minutes downs a cup of Joe — straight black, no sugar or cream — wanders bleary-eyed into his office at home, and flips on the computer.

Minutes later he is scanning the more than 100 e-mail messages he receives daily. It's a ritual he's become accustomed to. He answers some immediately; others he works within an hour at his Pentagon office. Hall posted his e-mail address in **Soldiers** shortly after he was appointed the top enlisted man in the Army. Three years later he still receives a daily dose of message traffic from soldiers throughout the Army and around the world.

While each of his days is hectic from the daily string of meetings with the various Army and Department of Defense staffs, he never fails to respond or have the appropriate agency respond to soldiers at the other end of his e-mail. Staying in touch with them keeps him fixed on their issues and provides him with the right focus and a common-sense approach to his role as their representative on the Army senior leadership team. Give soldiers a chance, and they'll not hesitate to say what's on their minds about pay, housing, health care and well-being.

Have another cup of Joe. The day has just started. Arriving at his office, he finds mounds of paperwork to sift through, plus meetings to attend, telephone calls to return and VIPs to greet. Just the other day, a Colorado Chamber of Commerce delegation stopped by to talk to him. The four-member delegation, including Fort Carson's commanding general, spent more than 30 minutes with Hall, talking about "soldier issues."

If you could divide Hall's job into thirds, it would be office work, visiting soldiers and participating in the legislative process. However, for Hall, soldiers and soldiering is what it's all about. He has spent his military life training, leading and mentoring them. As he has stated on many occasions, "I want to get some of the same mud on my boots as soldiers have on theirs." In other words, if you have shared their experiences and pain, you can be a more realistic and forceful advocate for them.

Hall methodically plans his workday to get the most from it so he can spend time with soldiers wherever they are. He spends enormous amounts of energy and time to keep their best interests foremost in Army senior leaders' and congressional members' minds.

Hall is driven, but he would not likely say he was a workaholic, although his normal workday is about 13 hours — 5:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Then there's always that last-minute

check of the computer around 10 p.m. before lights out at the Hall household.

Get another cup of Joe. It's time to go visit soldiers. Hall tries to make people feel that there is no glass between them as they talk. Face-to-face contact keeps him in touch with soldiers and their issues. When visiting them, he enthusiastically wades into the crowd to shake hands, pose for pictures and talk with those on the front lines of freedom, whether it be the DMZ in Korea, the deserts of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, or the mean streets of Bosnia, Macedonia or Kosovo.

In the big Army picture, visiting soldiers is a small thing, really. But not to Hall. It's one of the most enjoyable parts of his job. During his tenure as sergeant major of the Army he has traveled around the world 12 times and visited more than 60,000 soldiers. His goal was to put a "soldier's face" on current issues, meet people, hear their views, and go back to Army leadership and Congress and articulate those concerns in order to translate them into legislative responses.

Within about 30 minutes of taking office Hall asked soldiers to keep their faith in the Army, in their leadership and in themselves. That was in October 1997, when newspapers were full of negative headlines about Hall's predecessor and scandals at Aberdeen Proving Ground and other training centers. Soldiers were not doing the right thing. They were accused of criminal activities. And there was not

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Never out of touch with the Pentagon, SMA Robert E. Hall takes time out during a visit to Fort Knox, Ky., to speak with the chief of staff of the Army.



**Hall talks with 1st Armored Division soldiers during a visit to Germany.**

enough money or enough training time to meet mission readiness.

"But if you lose faith in the Army, you're going to start looking for all the negative things," Hall said at the time. "If you do that, you'll find them. Conversely, if you look for the Army's strong points, you'll find those, too."

Recently, soldiers have been generating more negative headlines. But Hall insists: "I'm not sure all those people are soldiers. I think some of them are simply criminals masquerading in BDUs. This criminal behavior is a personal choice an individual makes. It's an individual failing. You have to accept that you're going to have some soldiers who make the wrong choices and some of these choices will be criminal acts.

"But we can take comfort in the fact that the Army will not tolerate those kinds of failings and will prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law," he said.

Get another cup of Joe. It's time to talk to Congress.

When springtime rolls around, most soldiers and citizens look forward to breaking the wintertime blahs. So does Hall. But for him, springtime usually means one to four trips to Capitol Hill to testify before congressional committees. The hearings focus on quality-of-life issues as Hall and his senior enlisted service counterparts sit elbow to elbow to inform Congress of

the need to preserve service members' well-being.

Hall has testified before Congress and visited congressional leaders more than 17 times during his tenure. And, on several of his visits to installations, he has crossed paths with congressional members who were visiting their constituents at the same locations.

It's through those visits, meetings, e-mails and personal contact that Hall compiles soldiers' concerns and articulates them to Congress. He has had many successes while working with Congress and senior Army leaders over the past three years, but to hear him talk it was soldiers, not Hall, who created those successes. In his mind, his success depended on soldiers supplying the ammunition he needed to do battle.

**H**ALL will not list his successes or his disappointments, but all soldiers know who their forceful advocate was for the recent pay raise, pay-table reform and retirement-systems changes. Witnesses to Hall's battles for soldiers' rights heard on more than one occasion where some retired generals said, "Give it up, you can't win that battle."

Thank goodness, Hall didn't listen to them, because today soldiers are better and

the Army is a better place because of his tenacity. After all, he is just doing what he challenged himself to do when he was sworn in as the 11th sergeant major of the Army and what he has done the past 13 years of his military career — he's just being a sergeant major.

**N**OW Hall is sipping his last cup of Army Joe. He'll retire this month after more than 32 years of service to the nation. He will not have to rise at an obscene hour, wade through dense mounds of paperwork, return telephone calls or greet VIPs. He'll be more concerned about when he needs to mow the grass or where to plant Carole's flowers around their new home in South Carolina.

Hall's distinguished career epitomizes the consummate professional soldier that he is; one who kept the faith — faith in his soldiers, in the Army, and in the Army leadership.

Hall made a promise a long time ago. He promised, "as long as I was able to do this job, I'd do the very best I could."

For many, he has exceeded the standards and kept the Army on point for the 21st century. He stepped up to the plate in a dark period of Army history, when its "hooah" tank was running on empty. He brought credibility back to soldiers, the Army and the office of the sergeant major of the Army. He can proudly look back and say, "mission accomplished and job well done." □



**Never one to waste time, Hall works through his e-mail during a flight to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., before speaking to Pre-Command Course graduates.**